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THE WOMEN OF COYO: TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN ANDEAN PREHISTORY, SAN PEDRO DE ATACAMA, NORTH CHILE (A.D. 500-900)

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Beginning in the second century and continuing until the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century, the inhabitants of the large cluster of oases known as San Pedro in the Atacama desert of northern Chile buried their dead in the desert, in areas adjacent to shaded habitation sites and irrigated agricultural fields (Figure 1). The scarce oasis lands have been reused over the millennium and little former architectural evidence survives, however the cemeteries and the people themselves have been preserved. The arid Atacama desert has allowed the uncommon preservation of a vast quantity of prehistoric textiles and other usually perishable materials. Complete funeral bundles dating between the sixth and the tenth centuries have been uncovered in Coyo Oriental, the ancient eastern cemetery of the Coyo oasis. Not all bundles have been preserved equally, but remaining evidence suggests that a bundle included multiple layers of tunics, mantles and headdresses tied with strong camelid fiber ropes often surrounded by tools, weapons, food remains, bags, baskets and ceramics.

Most reconstructions of Atacama prehistory discuss the ceramic component and identify a single indigenous population residing in the oases of San Pedro (Berenguer et. al. 1986, 1988; Le Paige 1964; Tarrago 1968). But ceramics are not always present as burial offerings and, within the Southern Andes, ceramics could hardly be expected to provide the same intimate definition of personal identity as an analysis of the textiles could provide. Modern weaving in indigenous communities of the Southern Andes is known for its brilliant and intricate color and patterning which is ethnic-specific. In this area textiles are one of the most important aspects of material culture maintained by indigenous populations to define ethnic identity (Medlin 1991; Seibold 1992; Zorn 1990). There is nothing in the archaeological record to suggest that prehistoric Andean weaving was different. The multiple clothing styles represented in the ancient Coyo Oriental cemetery describe not a single homogenous culture, but multiethnic burials and possible multiethnic communities within the original Coyo oasis.

Style and Place

At least two separate groups of men, women, and children were buried in the Coyo Oriental cemetery and undoubtedly originally shared the Coyo oasis during the sixth to the tenth centuries A.D. One group was probably local deriving from an earlier San Pedro tradition, and the other highland, connected with the Bolivian altiplano and the cultural, political and economic center of Tiwanaku (A.D. 300-1000) whose preeminence in the southern Andes parallels the Coyo occupation.

Tiwanaku artifacts in San Pedro de Atacama have originally been described as exchanged items connected within a circulating llama caravan traffic (Browman 1980; Nunez and Dillehay 1979). But foreign textiles and artifacts might alternatively be considered as imported objects directly associated with original foreign populations. The present analysis supports just this hypothesis. Elaborate Tiwanaku tapestry tunics and mantles uncovered in Coyo, which I described in an earlier paper (Oakland 1986), were all connected with a specific set of warp-faced garments. These textiles are quite distinct from the local garment style evident not only in Coyo, but also in a variety of additional oases locations suggesting a much wider spread local style.

The concept of style has recently generated a wealth of anthropological discussion (Conkey and Hastorf 1990; Sackett 1982, 1990 among others). My own addition to the literature (Oakland Rodman n.d.) based in textile analysis from the Coyo Oriental cemetery, suggests that specifically designed and executed textile style was maintained by prehistoric ethnic groups as the principal emblem of group identification, similar to its use in contemporary indigenous Andean communities.

For the purposes of the present paper in attempting to specify and visualize the past, the clothing and associated artifacts recovered with the highland "woman with the red mantle" (a woman buried with a red Tiwanaku tapestry mantle) will be used as a contrast to the weaving styles of "two local sisters" (a hypothetical familial-tie: two women sharing the same tomb with closely related textiles). The separate styles were used in Coyo synchronically as ceramic associations and radiocarbon determinations suggest (600-900 A.D.). Groups were originally identified through a variety of other criteria, especially the male headdress form which is shared by men within groups but is distinctive between groups. The headdress center is particularly diagnostic: locals loop spiral designs and highlanders knot checked or diamond designs. Status differentiation is difficult to determine between groups. The highland woman's burial was equipped with more textiles than the local women, but her female companion buried in the same tomb had very few textile associations. Within the larger collection, the non-textile artifacts do perhaps suggest a greater status afforded the highland group in Coyo. But the textiles illuminate the distinctiveness and technical expertise apparent in both groups.

An examination of daily life in Coyo must consider components which have survived in death. Textile preservation in Andean prehistoric habitation sites is unfortunately rare. The types of information which cloth fragments scattered throughout a site and refuse area might contain contrasts greatly with that possible within an enclosed cemetery context. Because the mortuary textiles often show evidence of use, wear and repair, it is almost certain that many of the garments represent the daily attire of the local Coyo inhabitants.

Woman, Society and Prehistory

This paper's focus on women is a discussion pertinent to current anthropological (Gero and Conkey 1991) and art historical (Miller 1988) literature

where different voices are creating a broader image of prehistory. Contemporary ethnographic studies describe Andean society as a very fluid system where complementary gender-specific roles are understood as fixed but are, in fact, not always maintained. In the southern highland village of Songo, Catherine Allen (1988:73) describes the usual recognized situation:

In the complementary division of labor...Women spin thread from wool, weave on the ground on a horizontal loom, and sew the family's clothes. Men knit their own caps, make fine woolen ropes for harnessing the animals, weave on an upright loom with foot pedals, and do some simple carpentry.

But after discussing the accepted version of complementary roles Allen notes: "Men do almost as much spinning as women, and I have seen men weave fine ponchos, belts, and coca bags with complex designs on horizontal looms" (Allen 1988:78). Songo inhabitants maintain a concept that a division of labor exists: Don Luis told Catherine Allen (1988:78) that "in February when there's no agricultural work I'll be a woman and go around knitting". But concept and practice are constantly blurred as Allen (1988:78) remembers:

When I learned how to spin two years before, Basilia had exclaimed in delight, "Well, you're finally a woman!" Her husband, son, and *compadre* sat beside her, all of them spinning.

Social distinctions of gender traits in the Andes might be more clearly understood, not as only his or hers, but as more hers or his depending on the situation. Lynn Meisch (1991:11) recognized a similar theme in Jane Collins' (1988:140) description of the Peruvian community of Moho:

Although the Aymara stress the complementarity of male and female roles in their art, religion, and philosophy, the actual division of labor by sex is quite flexible. One commonly hears statements such as "men plow and women plant" and "women are better weavers than men," but there are few tasks that are not performed by individuals of either sex at one time or another.

Andean gender complementarity then provides the situation where members of each sex hold a knowledge of the other's roles (and may in fact actually perform them) and a definite understanding of excellence: a good weaver is appreciated by everyone. Women are understood as the principal weavers using traditional looms in most indigenous communities in the Southern Andes today. They are responsible for the production of their family's garments, but men also weave and knit caps and braid strong multiple strand ropes. Members of both sexes spin, but spinning, like weaving, is understood as woman's work in southern Peru, Bolivia and northern Chile.

It is possible that ancient Coyo women of both groups were responsible for much of the textile production, warping, weaving, and embroidering specific patterns relating to inclusive ethnic categories. A suggestion of women as weavers in prehistoric Andean contexts recognizes the variability of artifact distribution in archaeological contexts as well as the more-hers-or-his identification of gender roles in modern indigenous Andean communities. In Coyo Oriental male burials sometimes contain spindle whorls (9 whorls in men's- 27 in women's), but female burials often contain unspun fiber, needles, skeins of colored yarns, loom parts, weaving beaters, swords and spindle whorls.

The textiles buried with the "two local sisters" testify that they were extraordinary spinners and weavers, and, as if to emphasize this, their tomb was equipped with five spindle whorls.

The Woman with the red mantle: highland style

The "woman with the red mantle" died in approximately 670 A.D. (Beta 33853, BP 1310+/-70). She lived between 40 and 44 years of age. Stress registered in her skeleton identifies strenuous work related arthritis which could have been caused by a lifetime spent carrying heavy materials on her upper body, back, and shoulders (Arriaza 1990). Hammer stones and copper mineral associated with copper mining forms part of the Coyo inventory (Oakland 1990) and the woman may have been involved in this activity along with family members of both sexes.

But the woman was possibly also the weaver of the four tunics and at least two of the three mantles or skirts placed in her burial (Figure 2). The textiles were placed over her flexed body forming a compact funeral bundle tied with thick camelid fiber cords. Apparently both men and women wore a similar garment, the warp-stripped tunic, a warp-faced plain woven rectangle with a neck slit created through discontinuous wefts. The tunic was easily finished by folding and stitching along the side selvages leaving space for the armholes. Men's and women's hairstyles were distinct and may have provided the most immediately recognized stylistic differentiation between sexes. Men wore their hair long, braided in multiple strands, or wrapped in a single braid in the back. Women's hair, like that represented by the "woman with the red mantle", was parted in the center and twisted into two large buns on each side.

All of the warp-faced textiles in the "woman with the red mantle's" burial form a group of related garments with similar colors and warp-striped sequences. The symmetrically stripped warp-faced tunic with the embroidered neck plaque patterned in a checkerboard arrangement (Figure 2 A) identifies this woman as sharing a specific garment style with others of her group (Figure 4). In addition, the funeral bundle contained two asymmetrically striped warp-faced tunics (Figure 2 C,D) and another unpatterned warp-faced tunic (Figure 2 B), as well as two warp-striped mantles or skirt and an exquisite, red Tiwanaku tapestry mantle. The similarity in yarn diameters, colors and twists and comparable yarn counts in the warp-faced garments suggest the possibility of a single weaver, the woman herself.

The variation in counts and colors could be explained as the product of a difference in periods of manufacture; one mantle or skirt and one asymmetric tunic appear to be new replacements for her most worn and mended textiles. The red tapestry mantle contrasts with the other warp-faced garments in color and design, as well as technique, and is one of the most exquisite textiles uncovered in all collections from San Pedro de Atacama

There is nothing to suggest that the woman buried with the red mantle was also a tapestry weaver and could have created the red mantle. Tapestry in any form is rare in all collections from San Pedro de Atacama. The fineness and evenness of the threads, the brilliance of the dyed colors, the exacting execution of the repetitive pattern, and the tapestry structure itself all provide evidence that this garment was an import from the Tiwanaku center. A fine tear was repaired with a contrasting red yarn suggesting that the woman and mantle were removed from the original yarn sources after its manufacture. A reconstruction of the past might suggest that the mantle could have been a gift imported from the highlands or the woman could have brought it with her into the desert oasis.

Other Tiwanaku tapestries uncovered in Coyo Oriental were associated with the same warp-faced tunic embroidered with a checkerboard patterned neck plaque. An identical neck plaque was an embroidered feature common to Tiwanaku tapestry tunics from collections recovered throughout the area of Tiwanaku influence in the Southern Andes.

There are many possible reconstructions of the Coyo past, but the shared textile tradition linking the "woman with the red mantle" to others with identical structural and iconographic traits distinct from the local San Pedro style, attest to a foreign highland influence and probable occupation within the Coyo oasis. The woman and her group may have lived in San Pedro for a long time, but the notion of difference, separateness, inclusiveness and association with original place (Tiwanaku) was remembered and expressed through textile style.

Local style and the "two sisters"

San Pedro de Atacama, a desert oasis noted for its exchange networks, offers an ideal test location for the theory which explains cultural diversity as a product of multiethnic interaction. In Weissner's (1989) view, identification is created with specific reference to comparisons with others. Within a closed society very little difference will be expressed between individuals all familiar with one another, but in situations where constant interchange and competition for resources is evident, individuals and groups will establish a distinctive identity often based in elaborate textile style (Weissner 1984,1989; Wobst 1977). One garment style is repeatedly represented among the diverse costumes noted in the archaeological collections from the oases of San Pedro de Atacama and probably represents the local San Pedro style (Figure 3).

The earliest evidence for this style is found in the tunic embroideries (Figure 3 A) of a prominent male buried in the oasis of Quitar-6, tomb 2532 dating from approximately A.D. 340 (Berenguer et al. 1988:344; Le Paige 1963). The identical embroidery type associated with a series of specific warp-striped tunics has been uncovered in the oases of Coyo, Quitar-1, Quitar-3, Solcor and Catarpe. The embroideries and tunic striping (Figure 3 C) of a man buried in Coyo Oriental around 670 A.D. (Beta-33855, BP 1310+/-80) represents the development of local textile style contemporary with the "woman with the red mantle".

Apparently, local style underwent a further development toward an increasing interest in warp-patterned structures within the original warp-striping sequences noted in earlier periods (Figure 3 D). The "two sisters" from Coyo may have been influential in bringing this new patterning emphasis into the Atacama. Comparisons with ceramics, radiocarbon measurements, and other local style warp-patterned textiles in Coyo Oriental, as well as additional San Pedro locations, date the "two sisters" burial between 800-1000 A.D.

The "two sisters", between 40 and 44 years of age at the time of death, created a uniquely beautiful variation within the basic local style warp-striped tunic. Instead of simply striping their tunics with warp-faced plain weave and relying on the intricate local style selvedge embroideries to provide pattern, they wove complementary-warp patterns into the areas usually reserved for plain colored stripes (Figure 5). The garments are distinctive and elegant even in their fragmented state. One garment is slightly finer and is patterned with ten vertical patterned stripes where the other has only six.

Other examples of San Pedro local style complementary warp-patterning which are probably contemporary with the "two sisters" textiles usually include a few narrow warp stripes and light blue-green colors. The design and coloring of the "two sisters" complementary warp-patterning is placed in wider stripes with elaborate designs in orange, red and blue. Given the variable preservation within the San Pedro oases and in other northern Chilean sites, it is doubtful that any definitive source for the origins of the "two sisters" patterns will be located. Perhaps they adapted their own textile tradition into an Atacama style reflective of a foreign marriage alliance. The trend toward complicated warp-patterning was apparently a widespread phenomenon in northern Chile beginning around 1000 A.D. (Ulloa 1982) and the "two sisters" tunics may represent this same innovative direction. Perhaps they saw the patterns and structures in a regional market, at a large fiesta, or on a caravan trek outside of the oasis. Any of these prehistoric reconstructions are possible, or none might be, but they each suggest an active role for individuals such as these women from early prehistory.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper has focused on the textiles of three women who lived and died in the Atacama desert over a millennium before the present. The analysis is exclusive and was chosen to illustrate the presence of

individuals whose separate textile styles identify them as belonging to larger groups who lived and were buried together in the desert oasis for centuries and who continued to maintain a distinctive textile tradition possibly related to their original ethnic affiliations.

Coyo Oriental was probably not the only San Pedro location where multiethnic communities were formed and maintained in prehistory. Many comparable sites exist throughout the Southern Andes. An analysis of the textile styles preserved in prehistoric communities from Southern Peru, northern Chile, Bolivia and northwestern Argentina should begin to identify the ancient inhabitants as they originally identified themselves, thus allowing ancient Andeans to present their own story in prehistory.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a selected sample of textiles analyzed from the Coyo Oriental collections housed in the Museo R.P. Gustavo Le Paige S.J. in San Pedro de Atacama, Chile. The research was accomplished from June 1989 to March 1990 and in September 1990 and was supported by an interpretive research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (RO-21963-89). Portions of this paper were formulated during a grant of Released Time for Professional Research from the School of Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences of the California State University, Hayward, Winter Quarter, 1992. The advice and assistance of Agustin Llagostera, M.A. Costa, and Lautaro Nunez are always appreciated. Vivian Recine and Vicki Cassman opened the bundle of the "woman with the red mantle". Bernardo Arriaza and M.A. Costa sexed the burials and provided information concerning the skeletal material from Coyo Oriental.

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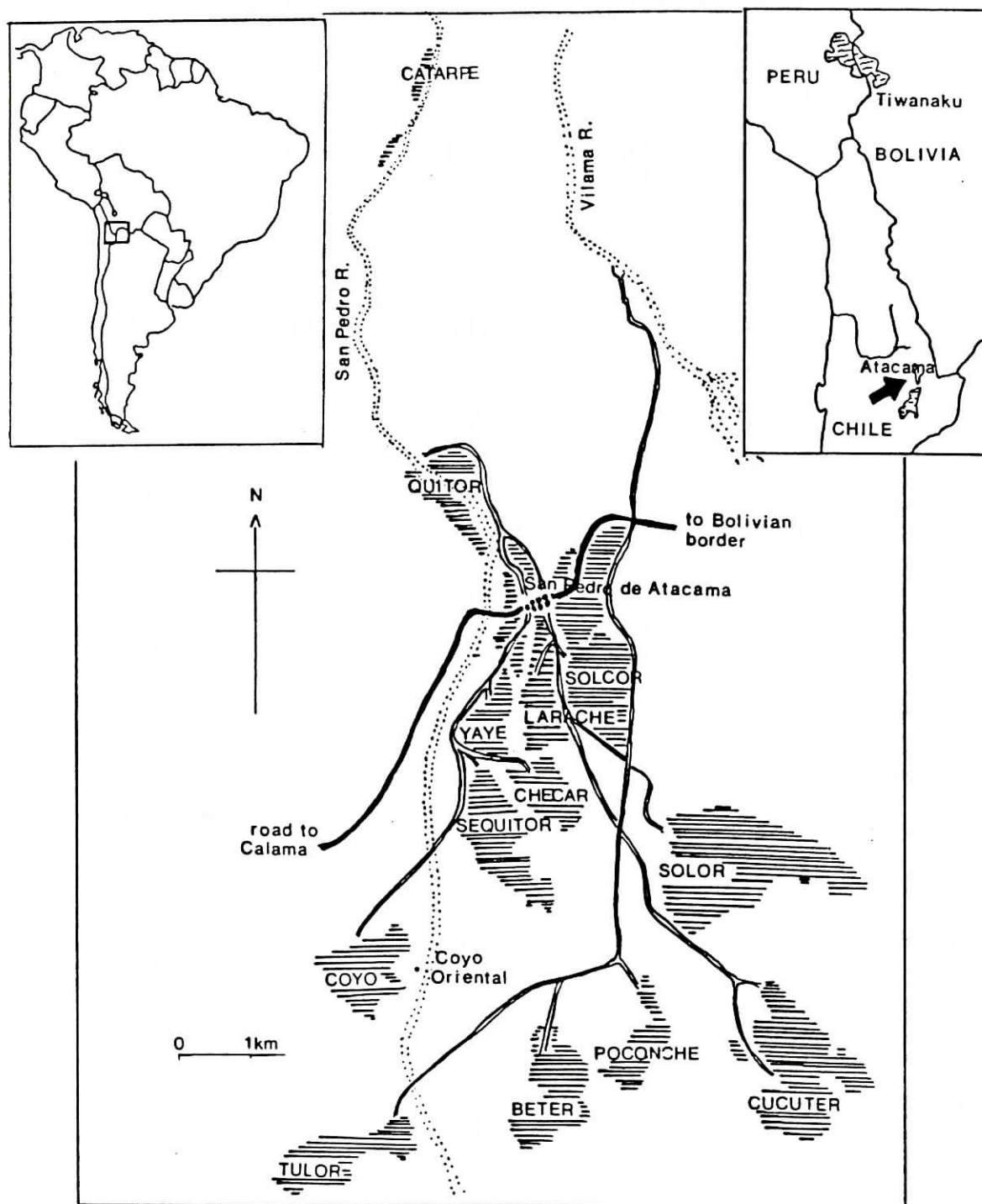


Figure 1. The textile collections from Coyo Oriental are located east of the Coyo oasis in San Pedro de Atacama, northern Chile.

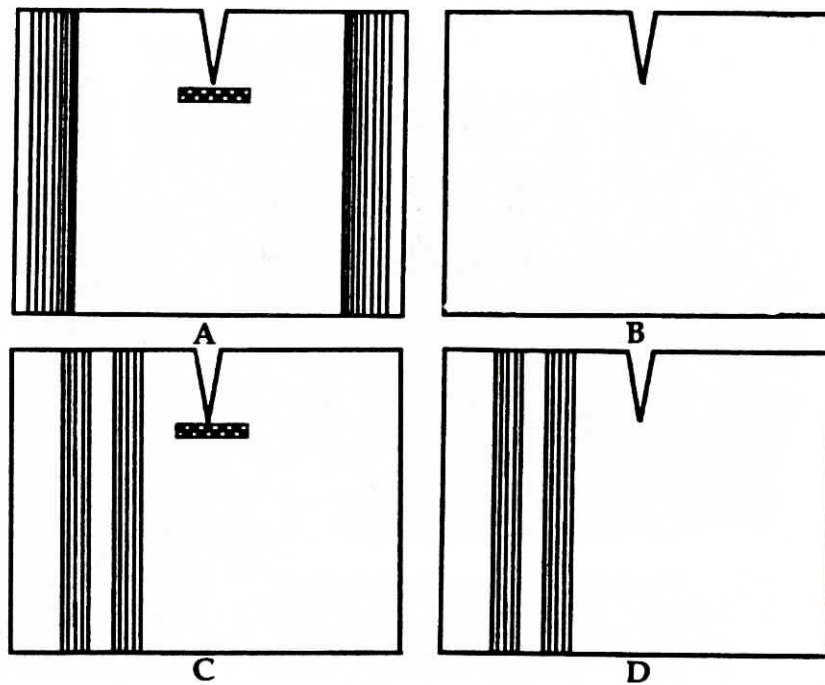


Figure 2. Diagram of four highland style warp-faced tunics uncovered with the "woman with the red mantle" in Coyo Oriental.

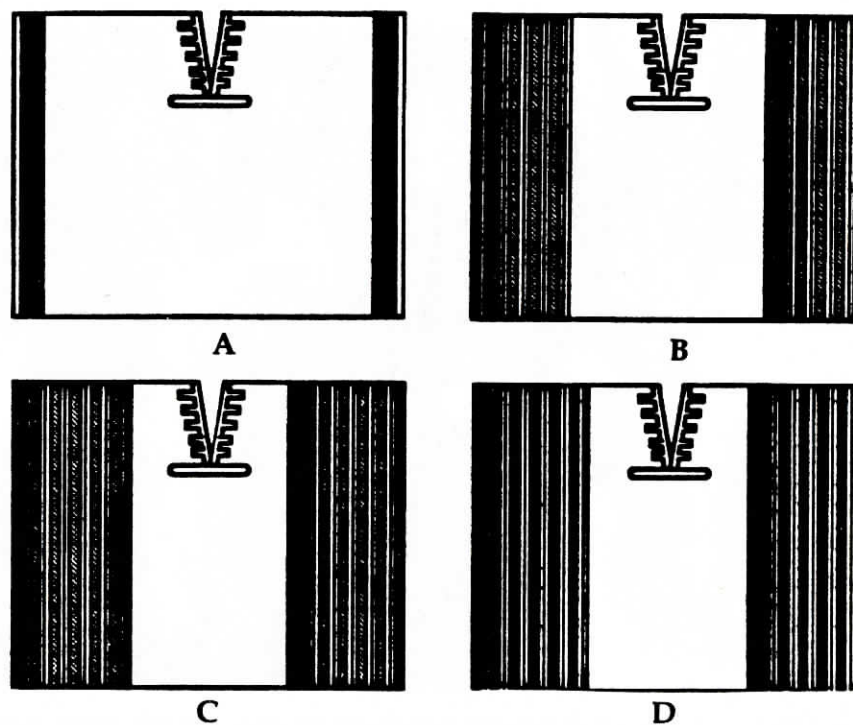


Figure 3. Diagram of four local style tunics represented in the collections from Coyo Oriental. Tunic D represents the warp-patterned style of the "two sisters".



Figure 4. Detail of the upper portion of a highland style tunic from Coyo Oriental similar to the "woman with the red mantle's" warp-striped tunic A.



Figure 5. Detail of the complementary-warp woven stripes from one of the "two sisters" local style tunics.